

On Wide Florida Roads, Running for Dear Life

Chip Litherland for The New York Times



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A pedestrian walked across Semoran Boulevard in Orlando last week. Some cars and trucks whiz by on the six-lane state road at 60 miles per hour, 15 m.p.h. above the speed limit.

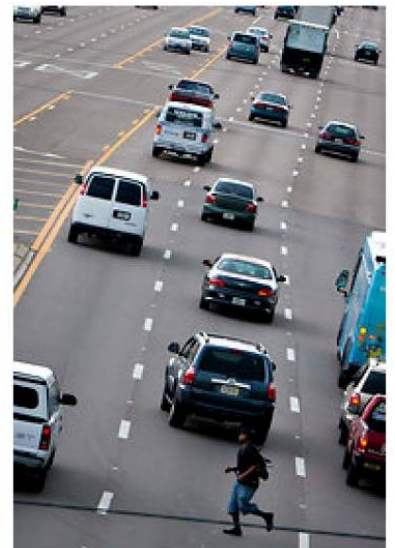
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ORLANDO, Fla. — As any pedestrian in Florida knows, walking in this car-obsessed state can be as tranquil as golfing in a lightning storm. Sidewalks are viewed as perks, not necessities. Crosswalks are disliked and dishonored. And many drivers maniacally speed up when they see someone crossing the street.

Then there are the long, ever widening arterial roads — those major thoroughfares lined with strip malls built to move cars in and out of sprawling suburbs.

It is no wonder that four Florida metropolitan areas, led by the Orlando region, ranked as the most dangerous places to walk in the country, according to [a recent survey](#) by Transportation for America, a nonprofit safety advocacy organization.

“So much of Florida has been built up so quickly in that era of the automobile-oriented design; it’s this sort of the boomer phenomenon,” said David Goldberg, communications director for the organization. “The tendency there has been to build the big wide arterials; you have these long superblocks and you can get up to a good speed.”



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A pedestrian bolts across Semoran Boulevard in Orlando, Fla.

The Orlando-Kissimmee region was first out of 52 in the rankings of most dangerous pedestrian regions, with more than 550 pedestrians killed from 2000 to 2009. This translates to an annual fatality rate of 3 per 100,000 people. Second was Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, followed by Jacksonville and Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach.

Researchers used 10 years of pedestrian fatality data and census figures to make their calculations relative to the amount of walking in a given area. Using that scale, New York City-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, home to the highest number of people who walk to work, is considered one of the safest cities for pedestrians. Anyone walking across Queens Boulevard may beg to differ.

Most of the metropolitan areas that fared poorly in the survey were in the South and Southwest, although California's Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario section was fifth on the danger index.

Hispanic and black residents — people who are the least likely to own cars — suffered the highest pedestrian fatality rates, according to the report, published in late May and titled "Dangerous by Design." Bus riders are particularly vulnerable, mostly because bus stops are often between intersections on long, wide roads and are far from stoplights. People race across to get to the other side, rather than walk (in steamy weather or after a long day's work) a quarter- or half-mile to a stoplight.

This is what Cindy Berdeguez did here the other day. Lugging plastic bags and a backpack, she frantically dashed across Semoran Boulevard, a six-lane state road where some cars and trucks whiz by at 60 miles per hour (the speed limit is 45). She paused briefly at the median and raced again. She and a friend had just left the food pantry at Catholic Charities, which sits squarely across the wide road from the bus stop.

"You've got to walk fast, you can't talk and you keep your eye on the road," she said, sweat pouring down her face. "There are no lights, no crosswalks and the bus stop is in the middle here."



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Colonial Avenue in Orlando. A survey showed the metropolitan area as the most dangerous for pedestrians in the United States.

The nearest stoplight was far in the distance, too far for her to walk in the heat. So she gambled. Overhead there were no streetlights, a big problem in the evening. "Oh my God, the traffic here," Ms. Berdeguez said. "People have no courtesy, no patience for human beings, no respect."

At that moment, a mother grabbed her two teenage daughters and ran across the same spot. "Every day I do this," said Nancy Tejeda, 38, shielding herself from the sun with a black umbrella. "Of course, I'm afraid. We all link arms and cross as quickly as possible. Drivers see you coming here and they speed

up."

Just down the street, the same scene played out repeatedly, only pedestrians raced across the road (where there was no median) to a neighborhood supermarket. One group included a child in a stroller. The road, like so many others, was built for cars and not people.

“Most accidents occur on the second half of the crossing,” said Brad Kuhn, the director of Bike/Walk Central Florida, a nonprofit group that supports safety for pedestrians and cyclists. “People bolt too soon. They misjudge.”

The problem is especially acute for children and the elderly, who have greater difficulty judging distances and speed. Orlando city officials say that the data is somewhat skewed by the number of tourists who visit the state, which inflates traffic. So far, though, tourists remain largely untouched by pedestrian fatalities. All too often, pedestrians get blamed for reckless behavior when it is the outdated design of roads and the location of bus stops that are at fault, Mr. Goldberg said.

In Atlanta, a young mother, Raquel Nelson, was sentenced to probation after her son was killed in 2010 when the family got off a bus after a long day out and walked across an intersection rather than to a stoplight, a common shortcut. The 4-year-old ran across the road by himself and was hit by a car. Ms. Nelson was convicted of homicide by vehicle, among other things. She has accepted a judge’s offer for a new trial. The driver served six months in jail for hit and run.

The case galvanized pedestrian safety groups and the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P.

“This blame-the-victim mentality is common,” Mr. Goldberg said. “We don’t stop and examine how highway planning and land-use planning can contribute to this.”

The Orlando region, which also ranked first in the previous pedestrian fatality survey, issued in 2009, has taken the reports seriously, advocates say. The city is building miles of sidewalks and setting up audible pedestrian signals. It has also increased the number of traffic-slowing measures. One of its newest neighborhoods, Baldwin Park, was built as a walking and biking community, with shops and schools easily accessible, narrow roads that encourage slow driving, and bike trails.

The city also works to modify bus stops, create overpasses and improve lighting, when possible. The state’s road warrior culture will be slower to change, but nonprofits are starting education (or etiquette) campaigns here to modify behavior. But roads tend to stretch beyond local government. Semoran Boulevard is a state road, which involves a separate department and a denser bureaucracy. Kissimmee has its own local government. And rural areas fall into their own category. Uniformity is difficult.

“We are trying to change the culture and this thinking that is car-centric,” said Frank Consoli, Orlando’s traffic operations engineer. “Any death is too many. We don’t want to see that. We don’t want Orlando also to get a reputation that we have problems here. We want to make it as safe as possible.”